

Higher ground

Young employees look for ways to climb the corporate ladder

After four or more years in college, many young employees think they are ready to skip right to the top of the corporate ladder. Some become frustrated and restless when they realize their job has just begun and that they have many years of work ahead of them.

Young employees can take a proactive approach to their career path and move up the ranks at an earlier age. Many companies develop programs to seek out and train these young, motivated professionals.

Josh Bushard, a 31-year-old partner in the Minneapolis office of Grant Thornton, a Chicago-based accounting firm, is the youngest employee of his rank. Bushard cites the knowledge he gained in his company's leadership program as evidence of the firm's commitment to its young employees.

"With all the experience that I received at the national level, I have a better understanding of the firm and its resources and the leadership than probably anyone in this office — and probably a lot more than anyone in the firm," Bushard says.

"From understanding the firm's business strategy and the resources and where to go for which things and where things are going, I really got a ton of invaluable experience. That translates into serving my clients better."

Age before duty?

While a young employee's promotion can be great for a company, it can often lead to alienation among older workers who believe they have paid their dues. This can be avoided by simply explaining the reasoning behind such events.

"The smartest organizations are identifying high-potential employees regardless of age or how many years experience they have under their belts," explains Helen T. Cooke, owner of Cooke Consulting Group, an executive coaching and leadership firm based in Haddon Heights, N.J. "These organizations will frequently have a multi-pronged approach toward leadership development, so that there's a program geared to young,

promising talent and there are programs that are generic for high potentials or address separate subsets. For example, a mentoring program for high potential women."

Though hiring young professionals as top executives is becoming more prominent these days, some experts say this is not a new trend. Luda Kopeikina, author of "The Right Decision Every Time: How to Reach Perfect Clarity on Tough Decisions" (Prentice Hall, \$27.99) says trends such as this come and go.

"Companies are always interested in promoting internal people who are carriers of the company's culture; younger people bring energy and creativity. In the age of tremendous globalization, you need people at the top who are comfortable in operating with blurred barriers between countries due to use of the Internet and prevalence of outsourcing. The younger generation is more versed in this than the older one," she says.

Good blend

Kopeikina, who became a vice president at GE when she was in her 30s, says finding the right mix of young and old in top positions is a delicate balance. This translates to more of an incentive for older employees to compete, while younger employees have the option of pursuing those jobs or taking a risk and breaking off to form their own company.

"There are many paths open to young executives who are successful," she says. "They can accelerate their career by taking top positions with larger and larger companies. If you look at a number of GE executives, many of them have done exactly that."

However, Bushard warns that there is a risk-and-reward component to being a young talent.

"If you want to keep yourself challenged and on a high trajectory in your career, you'll have to take risks a lot of times," he says. "I spent a lot of time thinking about and talking to people about what this could lead to, but there were no guarantees."

—Lisa Radke